

City of Taunton Access Live
February 24th, 2022

Mayor Shaunna O'Connell Opening Remarks:

Good evening everyone and thank you for joining this City of Taunton telephone town hall. It's great to be here on the line with you this evening. The purpose of our town hall tonight is to share information with you and answer your questions about the Bristol-Plymouth School construction project and the upcoming special referendum vote. We thank you for taking the time to join us and look forward to engaging with you on these important topics. We have assembled a panel of experts and professionals that are able to speak to all the topics related to the project and I will now just take a few moments to introduce our panel before we begin.

This evening, we have with us Pam Menconi, Elections Department Director, Patrick Dello Russo, Chief Financial Officer, Peter Winters, Assistant City Solicitor, Dr. Alex Magalhaes, Bristol-Plymouth School Superintendent, Nadine Rose, Bristol-Plymouth School Business Administrator, and from PMA Consultants, we have Sean Burke, Chad Crittenden, Project Director, Mark Adrean, Assistant Project Director, from HMFH architects, we have Tina Stanislaski, Principal, and also with us this evening is Margaret Maclean from UniBank.

So, we will get into the details of the project during the Q and A, but just to give a very broad overview for anyone who may not really have an understanding of the project yet, this is a proposal to build a new Bristol-Plymouth Regional Technical High School. Bristol-Plymouth serves seven cities and towns, and that includes Berkley, Bridgewater, Dighton, Middleboro, Raynham, Rehoboth and Taunton. These seven districts will vote on whether to approve the new school construction project and that referendum vote will occur on Saturday, March 5th. Polls open in Taunton from 9:00 AM until 3:00 PM.

The full cost estimate of the project at this point is \$305 million. And that \$305 million includes brand new buildings, modern state of the art equipment and technology, an athletics building and fields, contingencies, furnishings, utility connections, and movers for when the building is complete.

The Mass School Building Authority grant will pay up to and not more than \$125 million for the project and that's about 40% of the total \$305 million. The seven districts will pay the remaining \$180 million. The City of Taunton pays 41% of that 180 million and that equals about \$119 million, including principal and interest. So, that would translate into about \$4.2 million a year for the City of Taunton. That's just some broad information to get us going. We have a lot of wonderful people here this evening that are eager to share information with you.

Question: Where do I vote, and what are the hours of the election?

Pam Menconi: The date of the election is Saturday, March 5th. The hours are 9:00 AM to 3:00 PM. All of the polling locations that are traditionally used for Taunton elections will be utilized on this date as well. If you have a question about where you vote or what ward and precinct you would vote in, you can always contact our office at (508) 821-1044. You can also visit the homepage of the Election Department and we will have a listing of all the polling locations there as well. So, basically the voters will be utilizing their regular polling locations for this vote on Saturday.

Question: What determines how many students a municipality may send to the Bristol-Plymouth School? Can a municipality who currently sends students to Bristol-Plymouth drop out of this commitment opportunity?

Alex Magalhaes: In this type of agreement, there is no quota on number of students that come from each municipality. So, it's an application process determined by Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. And as far as dropping out, there is a process of dropping out that it needs to go out to all the towns. To drop out, you have to get a unanimous vote from the town and city to drop out of the region.

Question: Is the interest rate for the finance amount fixed or a varied rate?

Margaret Maclean: It's fixed on the day that it prices. So, it will be based on when they go to market the day that they sell.

Question: Based on the current interest rate, what would the total dollar amount to?

Margaret Maclean: When they say dollar, are they talking about the interest that's payable? Because I'm not really sure what that's asking. (Moderator: perhaps it's more in line with what will the interest rate cost be for the project?)

That's a prediction that I wish I could answer, but we won't know until we price. The schedules that are out there are conservative estimates. Hopefully they'll be less than what we're showing, but there's no way to know that. We're talking, two, three years out before they go to the market. And obviously the intention is to get the best rate possible.

Question: Is there a maximum rate that it could adjust to?

Margaret Maclean: No. So, once it prices, the rates are locked in. If anything, it could go down later on. Bonds are sold with a call feature. And if rates go down in those eight to 10 years where a call feature kicks in, then they have the chance to refund it, which is like refinancing the mortgage for a lower rate.

Question: Can you tell us how the remaining cost of the project will be distributed amongst the member communities?

Margaret Maclean: It's all based on the enrollment. So, all of the towns and the city have a share that's associated with them and it's basically calculated every year, correct me if I'm wrong, Superintendent, based on the enrollment at the time.

Alex Magalhaes: Yes, it is. It's the same financial responsibilities as when we go into budget season, it's all on enrollment. So, the percentages could fluctuate depending on enrollment of the year before. We call it the October First number.

Question: Superintendent, where will the new school be built?

Alex Magalhaes: The school will be built right now as many of the schools do. They usually build them in the athletic field. So, right now where we have our football field, that's where the school would be built

and in that case, it would not interfere with the education process. We may have a problem with the football game, the football practice, but we'll deal with that then.

Question: What if you work on Saturdays for the polling, is there any other way to vote?

Pam Menconi: There are absentee ballots available. The decision to hold the referendum on a Saturday was determined by a vote by the Bristol-Plymouth school committee. Recognizing that some people are not available on a Saturday, there is an option to vote by absentee ballot. And in order to vote by absentee ballot, you must first fill out an application.

And there's two ways that you could do that. You can request that the ballot be mailed you. The deadline to submit that application is Tuesday, March 1st at 5:00 PM. It is getting a little bit tight for the turnaround mailing time. So, if anybody is going to utilize that option, I would urge people to do so quickly. If you would like to vote absentee in person, you can visit the Elections Office at City Hall, fill out an application, and you can vote there. And the deadline to vote in person absentee would be 12:00 noon on Friday, March 4th. Thank you.

Question: What is the square footage of the new building and where would it be located on the current BP campus?

Chad Crittenden: The square footage of the new building is proposed and approved at 419,765 square feet. The location would be on what is currently the football field. So at the existing site immediately adjacent to the existing building. And yes, that project budget does include necessary site improvements related to drainage, parking, and fields. It also includes the abatement and demolition of the existing building, and then the final site improvements underneath where that existing building sits.

Question: What is the current impact to my annual taxes, both paid and in process? Based on my current tax bill, what portion or percentage of my total tax bill goes to the BP Regional High School?

Patrick Dello Russo: There's currently no tax impact per se. The City of Taunton pays for an annual assessment. In fiscal year 2022, \$4,050,159 currently based on our enrollment. This project would effectively add \$4.2 million to that total, based on enrollment.

Question: Is Taunton always going to pay the 40% that was mentioned, even if enrollment fluctuates?

Patrick Dello Russo: If enrollment goes down, we pay less. If enrollment goes up, we pay more.

Question: Since the interest rate is fluid and is not set yet, does that mean the town's share of the cost could go up?

Patrick Dello Russo: Once the bond is sold, the interest rates will be determined. And then again, the total cost, what I'm understanding is that this is going to be a level debt service type of project, meaning that the City would pay the same amount annually and they would be adjusted with interest rates going up or down. Principal would offset the up or down to be the same amount equally over the 30 year note. That's my understanding.

Question: What amount will each taxpayer be paying for this project since we're already paying for another building?

Margaret Maclean: So, based on the average estimated impact on a 100,000 house, the average taxpayer would be... Well, again, this is per 100,000 it would be about \$66 per 100,000 of your median house value. So, if your house is worth 100,000, it's another \$66. If it's worth 200,000, you double that.

Mayor Shaunna O'Connell: Our CFO just wanted to add to that in case his answer is more particular to Taunton rather than generically the whole entire district members.

Patrick Dello Russo: Correct. Yes. So, on average over the course of the note, it's going to be 54 cents per thousand. What that means for us is, on a \$400,000 home value, on an annual basis you'll be paying \$200 more a year. For the next 30 years. That's what it means in simplistic terms.

Mayor Shaunna O'Connell: Particular to Taunton.

Patrick Dello Russo: Particular to Taunton. Correct.

Question: Where do I get an absentee ballot?

Pam Menconi: The absentee ballot can be either mailed to a voter or they can be voted in the Elections Office at City Hall. We are not permitted to hand ballots to people to take home. So, they would need to utilize the application mailing or the in-person application. Thank you. (Moderator: And again, they get that at the City Hall?

Pam Menconi: That's correct, at the Elections Department at City Hall in Taunton. I don't want to speak for member communities, but I believe that they would want to contact a town clerk's office in their member community to see what their process is for that.

Question: Can a member community vote to opt out if they want to, assuming the debt exclusion is approved?

Peter Winters: Once the project has been approved, the member communities are bound to pay for the debt that's associated with the particular project and they can't opt out. And it's a vote for all of the member communities, and it's based on the majority of the vote for all of the members.

Question: So, clarifying, the question was, Can a member community vote to opt out if they want to assuming that the debt exclusion is approved?

Peter Winters: No, they cannot opt out.

Question: Is early voting or voting by mail available?

Pam Menconi: Current legislation does not allow for early voting or vote by mail, so that option is not available for this March 5th referendum. However, again, the absentee ballots are available for those who do qualify.

Question: Is there any projected time for when Taunton High School may need to build a new school? This question's being asked because taxpayers will be paying for 30 years for the BP school, so will we also have to pay for another school?

Patrick Dello Russo: Well, we don't have our Building Department here with us this evening, but Taunton High School is in good shape. We've had renovations done recently in the past 10 years. It would, however, be difficult to assume a greater debt service amount at this time in addition to the BP project. That would be two very large numbers that we'd have to assume.

Question: Instead of a rebuild, did anyone look at rehabbing option and is that a possibility, go ahead and rehabbing a current building?

Tina Stanislaski: We had to look at multiple options for the MSBA. They're the funding agency for the project. We looked at a repair option. So, we looked at what it would take to basically repair all of the systems and bring the building up to code, not add any square footage to the building. We got prices for that. And then we looked at multiple versions of renovation addition options. We looked at one option that would basically renovate the entire school and build additions on the back in the parking lot. That took eight years to do, because you'll know with a renovation of a vocational school, you can't simply buy modular classrooms and put students in them when they need to be in their shops. You can't recreate an auto shop in a modular classroom. So, it's very tricky to renovate and it would take a long time to do.

We also looked at another option that saved just a portion of the building, the gym, and built a new school adjacent to that. And we also looked at multiple versions of the new option, and we got estimates for all of those. And the way the school decided was comparing all of the estimates for all of those different projects, and the new option was the least expensive out of the options that added square footage to the building. So, the repair option was slightly less, but again, that doesn't add any square footage to the building, and the biggest issue that they have is that they need a lot more square footage. They need almost double what they have now.

Question: Can you please tell me how the remaining cost of the project will be distributed amongst the member communities, and is it an even split amongst the member communities or is it prorated?

Patrick Dello Russo: I think we answered that question earlier, it all depends on enrollment. It's distributed by the percentage of students that come from each member community.

Question: If the project is approved on March 5th, can it be financed with Taunton's property tax levy?

Patrick Dello Russo: Yes. The City of Taunton would be seeking to do a debt exclusion. This would require all the voters to go cast a ballot in favor of funding the assessment addition to the taxes they pay. For instance, if your home is valued at 400,000, you will pay about \$200 more per year. Should a

debt exclusion vote fail, Taunton would need to make, on average for the next 30 years, \$4.2 million worth of budgetary cuts across multiple municipal divisions. We would have to fund the assessment within our current revenues. This would require us to reduce service levels across all municipal divisions.

Mayor Shaunna O'Connell: Did that answer your question or do you need some expansion on that?

Question: What I heard is that if it is excluded and the debt can't be assumed, that the City will go through some budget cuts in the services that it provides?

Mayor Shaunna O'Connell: Correct.

Pam Menconi: Just to reiterate what Patrick said, if the yes vote on March 5th happens, what it basically means is that the project is approved. The next step would be to determine how the City will fund their portion of the project, which means that an additional election in the city would be held so that voters could decide if they would like to approve that debt exclusion to satisfy their obligation to fund the project.

Question: In regards to if the debt exclusion fails, how will the City fund the project?

Patrick Dello Russo: The City would have to stay within its current annual revenues. So, we would have to effectively reduce services in the amount of the new assessment that we're bringing on. We'd have to find \$4.2 million worth of service reductions i.e. cuts across all the municipal budgets, with the exception of the School Department.

In order to take on this assessment without a debt exclusion, we would have to reduce services by \$4.2 million across multiple municipal divisions, because we only get so much revenue annually. We don't get \$4.2 million in new growth annually, so that's what we have to do.

Question: How do we know if the project is approved or not?

Pam Menconi: A majority vote totaled from all of the member communities determines the outcome.

Question: Who counts all those votes? Where do they come?

Pam Menconi: To clarify and expand on that, each member community would total their community's votes at the end of the election. All of the totals from each community would then be added together, so to speak, to determine the number of yes votes versus no votes. So it would be typically the way that elections are handled; the same end of the night procedures, so to speak, the same tallying. Once all of the communities have their numbers, there'll be coordination of those to determine what the final total tally would be.

Question: If the project is approved, when would groundbreaking occur?

Chad Crittenden: We have roughly one year of design from the date of the project approval, and we'd be looking at procurement starting next February. We have a few months of procurement, so there's a prequalification process, and we would break ground late spring or early summer of 2023.

Question: Considering the current Taunton tax rate for residential properties at \$13.18, if the BP Regional High School construction project gets full approval, then what will the tax rate for subsequent years, 2023, 2024, and so on be?

Patrick Dello Russo: There'll be little impact on '23 and '24's operating budget. The bond is going to be for 30 years, not 20 years. The City of Taunton will be issued the assessment from Bristol-Plymouth Regional for \$4.2 million on average annually, in addition to our current assessment of over \$4 million. The City will seek a debt exclusion by way of an additional vote. If the debt exclusion vote passes, the impact, as we mentioned earlier, will be 54 cents per thousand. For Taunton residents, that's a little over \$200 per year on a \$400,000 home, and it's for a time of 30 years. After the 30 years, the exclusion will go away, so it's temporarily there for 30 years.

Question: Is there any way for a community to opt out if they can't afford the cost associated with this project?

Peter Winters: No, there's no way that they can opt out. Once the debt is set, we're obligated to pay it.

Question: When is the projected opening of the new building, if everything is approved?

Chad Crittenden: We would be looking at occupancy September of 2026, and then the phase two work, final set improvements underneath where the existing buildings sit would be completed later that fall of 2026.

Question: In what part of 2026 would the opening be?

Chad Crittenden: September 2026.

Question: Is the vote on March 5th strictly to vote yes or no for the project or for the funding as well?

Pam Menconi: The vote on March 5th is to just approve or disapprove of the project. It does not approve or disapprove of how the City would fund their portion if it is approved. Basically, if a yes vote is passed, it simply means that the project is approved, and then the next step would be to figure out the funding by ways of a debt exclusion election. So there would be two separate elections if the project is passed. You're voting on March the fifth to simply approve or disapprove of the project. The funding would be voted separately.

Question: Is the interest rate of the financed amount a fixed or variable rate?

Margaret Maclean: The rate is fixed on the date that we price. However, it varies from year to year. But it's locked in once we price it.

Question: Can Taunton use ARPA funds to pay a portion of the City's share?

Mayor Shaunna O'Connell: ARPA, that's ARPA. That's the American Rescue Plan Act funding that our city received from the Federal government. When you think about this project and the fact that we'll be paying for it for 30 years, which is normal with any school project, it's either 20 or more, it's important to have a consistent funding mechanism in place, rather than just trying to kind of dream up how you're going to pay for it each year. Using ARPA funds would just be a one-time use of those funds, and it really wouldn't make a lot of sense and it certainly wouldn't put much of a dent in the bill for the school. So, thank you for the question.

Question: Who is paying for this election/referendum?

Pam Menconi: Bristol-Plymouth is going to be paying for the election on March 5th. They are absorbing the cost associated with that election. However, if there is a second referendum for debt exclusion, that election cost would be, the city would be responsible for that election fee.

Question: If the vote does not pass by all the member towns, then what will the next steps be? And will the school just continue to operate as-is with basic maintenance improvements rather than the full rebuild?

Chad Crittenden: Well, the next steps would be we would follow along with the renovation project, which would bring the school to code, because there is a lot of issues that need to be addressed. I believe the \$137 million is what the forecast for that renovation would be.

Question: Will this school be a model school-type project designed similar to previous schools to save on the design costs, or will it be a completely unique building?

Margaret Maclean: There isn't currently a model school for a vocational school. Vocational schools are very unique in their design and layouts. Also, there isn't a model school for something of this size. You heard us say before that the new school is about 420,000 square feet.

Question: Can you explain how the debt exclusion process works?

Patrick Dello Russo: Typically, your taxes go up 2.5% a year as you're getting your tax bill. The debt exclusion vote, it's separate from your current taxes. It will be added for a duration of 30 years to cover the cost of the assessment.

Question: What is the current level of students in the Bristol-Plymouth system and what is the forecasted number for the future?

Chad Crittenden: Well, that's hard to determine, because it depends on the application process. Again, like I mentioned earlier, there is no set quarter for each town or city. It's all dependent on applications. The school will increase another 100 or so students to what exists now. There are others, so it all depends. Right now at Taunton, I believe... I don't know the exact number. I don't have it with me right now, but it's about 40% of students are from Taunton, and that has fluctuated.

Question: What happens if a town involved defaults, if they don't pay their share?

Nadine Rose: I think that we would have to defer that to the Department of Ed if a school district has a town member community that doesn't pay. That would have to be something that would be taken up with the Department of Education.

Chad Crittenden: Yeah. That would be a legal question with Department of Ed.

[Peter Winters: It is unlikely that a town would default. However, there are contingency funds built into the bond to provide interest payments to the bond holders in the short term. Ultimately, the District would need to pursue collection from the town under the District Agreement.]

Question: How much will this election cost?

Pam Menconi: Just to reiterate, BP is picking up the cost of the election on March 5th. However, a debt exclusion election would be absorbed by the City. Typically, the cost to run an election is anywhere between 60 to \$70,000. It doesn't matter if it's a simple yes or no. It doesn't matter how long the ballot is. The election process would be the same, and that would be around 60 to \$70,000.

Question: What changes other than space does the BP management team plan for the school? Are there different shops and other significant changes?

Chad Crittenden: The shops are the same shops that we have. The square footage is at the square footage at the recommendation of the department of elementary and secondary education right now. The only other thing, the cafeteria is larger than what it is now, and we have a, instead having a cafetorium, we would have an auditorium.

Question: An application process has been mentioned. Are some students denied the ability to attend Bristol-Plymouth and if so, is there any preference to Taunton students who are paying a greater percentage of the cost?

Chad Crittenden: Well, the percentage is because of quantity, not necessarily the whole amount. It goes by quantity of students. So, if another town has more number of students, they're going to pay another higher share of the cost as well.

Question: [I totally agree we need a new BP, my concern is as a Senior Citizen having my taxes go up AGAIN is definitely going to cause financial problems to myself and many other seniors. A suggestion that would be nice is obviously us seniors do not have children in schools any longer and it would help the seniors out a lot if we could be exempt from the tax increase? I hope the elected city officials could take this into consideration when doing the tax increase next year if this new building goes through.]

Patrick Dello Russo: Well, there's currently no legal mechanism to exempt seniors from a particular tax increase, but I will however mention that Mayor O'Connell did double the local senior tax exemption for those who qualify.

Question: Why aren't the hours the same as regular elections and why is voting on a Saturday instead of a Tuesday?

Pam Menconi: All of the specifics of the election were determined by the Bristol-Plymouth School Committee. They are the authority in this election. So, the hours of election from 9:00 to 3:00 were set by the school committee at a vote at one of their meetings. They also chose the day of Saturday to hold the election at their school committee meeting by vote.

Question: Will this new building allow Bristol-Plymouth to expand their vocational programs?

Chad Crittenden: If you're asking about adding additional programs, we are looking at additional programs depending on the need in the area community industry, but the design of the building, it would allow some movement to add other programs in the future.

Question: Would that be by way of perhaps convertible type classrooms or non-specific? I understand certain vocations require certain specifics in their teaching areas, but would there be flex rooms?

Alex Magalhaes: One of the things we actually do more often than not than just add, sometimes we do get rid of some of programs that may no longer be useful for our students and any new programs that the trend is moving towards. We sometimes decommission the programs and put a new one in that area. Or sometimes we would downsize one of the programs and add another program into that.

Tina Stanislaski: I was going to just add to that that the construction, the way that we'll build the new building, is flexible so that we can easily take down walls in the future if we need to and add new walls. And the systems will be flexible too. So, like the Superintendent said, if they wanted to take one program out and add a new program, it'll be easier than any existing building which has a lot of CMU block walls, which make it really hard to renovate.

Chad Crittenden: When we were on the board at MSBA, they wanted to make sure that it was a building that would last for the next 50 years. And we had to come up a plan, what would 50 years look like? And if we looked at in 1972 and what it would look like where we at today, technology back in 1972 isn't what it was today. So, we had to try and think ahead, and those are some of things we anticipated.

Tina Stanislaski: We also had some areas for expansion plans, so that in the future if they do actually need to add onto the school, there will be areas for that to happen.

Question: What are taxpayers currently paying for Taunton High's debt exclusion, and when is that scheduled to end?

Patrick Dello Russo: The Taunton High School project is scheduled to end on our debt service in 10 years. So, with 2033, it will be off of the book, so to speak. The current amount we're paying in principal, I didn't bring the interest for you this evening, which I can provide, of course, is a little over \$150,000 annually in the preceeding years. And that, again, is going out to 2033.

Question: If the debt exclusion fails, can we opt out of the project?

Pam Menconi: If the debt exclusion fails, we cannot opt out of the project. The determination on March 5th determines which direction the project will go in. There's no going back, so to speak. So, if it's a no vote on March 5th or a yes vote, we have to follow that course. So, to answer the question, if it is a yes vote, so to speak, which results in another debt exclusion election, if that debt exclusion fails, we cannot opt out of the project.

Mayor Shaunna O'Connell: Then we would just be looking in our budget and how do we pay for this within the budget that we currently have.

Pam Menconi: That would go back to what Patrick had talked about earlier about the cutting of the services.

Question: Could we just go over one more time the absentee?

Pam Menconi: Absentee ballots are available for those who qualify. In order to receive an absentee ballot, you need to fill out an application first. You can find the application on our webpage. It does need to be completed and signed and returned to our office. If you would like to have a ballot mail to you, the deadline for us to receive that application is Tuesday, March the 1st at 5:00 PM. You can return the application to us via mail, in person, or you can email the signed application back to us at elections@taunton-ma.gov. And that would be to have one mailed to you. The deadline for that again is March 1st, which is Tuesday.

So, it is getting close to that deadline. We want to allow ample time for mailing and returning of the ballots. All of the absentee ballots do need to be returned by the close of the polls on election day, which again is 3:00 PM on Saturday, March the 5th. If you have an absentee ballot that you are returning, you want to make sure that it gets returned to the Elections Department at City Hall and not to the polling location. The deadline to vote absentee in person in the Elections Office is Friday the 4th at 12:00 noon. So, if the deadline for mailing has passed and you're able to vote absentee in person, you'll want to visit the Elections Department until Friday at 12:00 noon on the 4th.

Question: So, if March 5th votes is to approve/disapprove the project and there will be a subsequent vote for a debt exclusion, if the project is approved on the 5th but the debt exclusion does not pass, will we need to cut four mill per year from the budget?

Patrick Dello Russo: Yes, that's a factual statement. And then again, that's based on enrollment. So, again, more kids we have to pay more, less kids we pay a little bit less. But that's the reality.

Mayor Shaunna O'Connell Closing Remarks:

I want to take a moment, of course, to thank our panelists for sharing their time and expertise with our City residents and answering all of these questions this evening. We had some great questions. Thank you all very much. Just a reminder that the special referendum vote is on Saturday, March 5th and polls here in Taunton will be open from 9:00 AM to 3:00 PM. And I want to take a moment to thank you all Taunton residents who have joined us this evening. We appreciate your thoughtful questions and your interest in this project. I'm sure a lot of people that called in have attended the high school. I do hope

that the presentation tonight was informational and helpful in giving you an understanding of the project and answering your questions. And you can find detailed information on the City of Taunton website and also, of course, on the Bristol-Plymouth website. So, once again, thank you all for your time this evening, and I hope everyone has a great night.

Moderator: So, again, we are beginning to wrap up this call. Definitely thank you to everybody who took the time to join this important live event with Mayor O'Connell. We do appreciate the opportunity to hear directly from you, as well as answer your questions. But as a reminder, if we weren't able to get to your question this evening, you can send us an email at publicinfo2022@taunton-ma.gov. Again, that email address is publicinfo2022@taunton-ma.gov. We'll keep you informed with regular updates on the City of Taunton website, taunton-ma.gov, and on the City of Taunton Facebook page. Thank you again for taking the time to join us for this conversation. We hope you have a great night.